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SUBJECT: IRF VISITS PROVINCIAL LAOS TO GAUGE RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

REF: 08 Vientiane 0579

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED: PLEASE PROTECT ACCORDINGLY.

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary: In May, DRL Office of International Religious Freedom (DRL/IRF) officer traveled with PolOff through three northern provinces - Luang Prabang, Oudomxay, and Luang Namtha - to assess religious freedom conditions. Predictably, the further away the officers traveled from Vientiane or provincial centers, the poorer the understanding and implementation by local officials of the country's religious freedom policy, Prime Minister's Decree 92. However, meetings were still frank and, with the exception of Luang Namtha, the central government's stated intention to support religious freedom and propagate Decree 92 appeared to be gradually taking hold in the north of Laos. Religious leaders the officers met with in the course of the trip also reported that the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) - the Party's mass organization responsible for supervising the practice of religion - has made sincere efforts to resolve some recent high-profile cases and educate all involved about Decree 92. These same leaders said that, while non-Buddhist religions still operated with a great deal of caution, overall the situation has improved in recent years. End summary.

Vientiane Meetings: LEC and LFNC

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**¶2.** (SBU) DRL/IRF Off and PolOff met with leaders at the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) headquarters in Vientiane. Laos only recognizes four religions: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i faith. Registered Christian groups include the Catholics, the Seventh Day Adventists, and the LEC as the umbrella group for all other Protestant denominations. The LEC leaders shared with the officers information received by the LEC on a range of religious issues, as well as a general perspective that progress is being made toward more religious freedom despite ongoing problems at the local level in some areas.

**¶3.** (U) DRL/IRF Off and PolOff then met with the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) Religious Affairs Department Director General Khaophone Vannabouth to express thanks for the LFNC's support and discuss details of the trip. (Comment: Although official Lao approval for the visit was only granted five minutes after DRL/IRF Off's plane landed in Vientiane, the LFNC wound up successfully facilitating meetings with officials in all three provinces as well as arranging a visit to Luang Namtha Province's Sing District, 8km from the China border and a location with reported religious persecution problems. End comment.)

... LFNC - the IGE Conference

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**¶4.** (SBU) The officers discussed with DG Khaophone a proposal for a multinational conference on religious freedom to be held in Laos in the near future (reftel). The proposed conference, sponsored by the U.S.-based Institute for Global Engagement (IGE), would include the

sharing of best practices on training on legal protection for religious freedom. IGE sponsored similar conferences in Vietnam in 2007 and China in 2008. The conference was originally proposed for October 2009, with the Lao Academy of Social Sciences to work with IGE as the local organizer. However, DG Khaophone explained that preparations for the upcoming Southeast Asia Games - to be held in Laos in December 2009 - prevented the Government from being able to support the conference as originally scheduled. The LFNC has recommended to IGE that the conference either be postponed to early 2010 or held in another country. The status of the conference is still undecided.

... LFNC - the USCIRF Report

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**¶15.** (SBU) The officers presented DG Khaophone with a copy of the sections on Laos from the 2009 annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF), released just one week before the visit. They explained that USCIRF is an independent commission appointed by the Congress and does not represent the views of the State Department. The officers pointed out that the 2009 report placed Laos on a USCIRF watch list for violations of religious freedom - one step below recommending that Laos be named a country of particular concern (CPC) for severe violations of religious freedom. This recommendation, they cautioned, had been sent to President Obama and was very influential, particularly among members of Congress. Although the Department of State does not maintain a watch list for CPC countries, such a recommendation by USCIRF meant that Laos would be under increased scrutiny by our Congress and concerned members of the international community. For that reason, the officers explained, the LFNC's willingness to work together with the Embassy and visiting officials to address

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religious freedom concerns and access areas where reported problems occurred was all the more critical.

**¶16.** (SBU) DG Khaophone appeared genuinely concerned about the USCIRF report. While he said he understood that the USCIRF report was different from the Department's International Religious Freedom report, he seemed to grasp the significance of its recommendations. He welcomed the opportunity to clarify his country's record on religious freedom and stressed Laos' commitment to supporting religious freedom, providing religious believers were not divisive, promoted harmony, and supported the ideals of the State. As in previous meetings with DRL/IRF Off, DG Khaophone asked that if any specific cases arise they be brought to his attention. In the past, the LFNC has been able to intervene in conflicts and educate those involved about Decree 92 in order to resolve problems.

**¶17.** (SBU) DG Khaophone said that, although Decree 92 guarantees the right to religious freedom, not all officials at the district level - particularly in the outer provinces - had a full understanding of the government policy. The LFNC, he explained, is making a real effort to train its officials and to resolve problems when they do occur. Since 2006 the LFNC has instituted phased training on Decree 92 in the outer provinces. The training programs, which are paid for and organized in conjunction with the LEC, include officials from the national, district, and village levels as well as police officers and villagers. Although these training programs have been successful in educating attendees about the right to religious freedom in Laos, he acknowledged that much work still needs to be done and looked forward to another training program later in 2009.

Luang Prabang: An Activist Director for the LFNC

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**¶18.** (U) In Luang Prabang officers met with LFNC Provincial Chairman Kongchanh Khammavong. Mr. Kongchanh highlighted the strengthening of the relationship between Laos and the United States, particularly in terms of human rights and the joint excavation of remains of those missing from the war years. He highlighted the critical assistance that the United States has given Laos in combating opium as well as the humanitarian assistance programs supported by the United States.

¶9. (SBU) Turning to religious freedom issues, Mr. Kongchanh emphasized standard government policy, stressing that the Government does not allow individuals to pressure anyone to convert to another faith and that coercion, including the use of bribes, is illegal. He continued that all religious groups have a responsibility to participate in village development. Mr. Kongchanh stated that there were no officially registered LEC churches in Luang Prabang.

(Comment: His statement contradicted what the LEC had earlier reported to PolOff. End comment.) Instead religious believers were free to practice in their homes with permission from local authorities. Finally, Mr. Kongchanh acknowledged that sometimes misunderstandings arise between believers and non-believers, both of whom are not always clear about Decree 92 and Laos' policy towards religion.

¶10. (SBU) Mr. Kongchanh detailed a range of minor problems that have occurred in Luang Prabang, including tourists distributing Bibles without permission and missionaries coercing ethnic minorities to convert to their faith by promising favors. In one case in particular, he asserted that a con-artist extorted money from poor Buddhists in exchange for promises of salvation after death. Mr. Kongchanh also explained that some Christian believers conduct services in their homes without permission from local authorities in violation of Article 20 of Decree 92.

¶11. (SBU) At the same time, Mr. Kongchanh acknowledged that local authorities were sometimes the wrongdoers. "People mistake implementation of the law with forcing people to deny their faith," he said. For example, in July 2008 there had been an incident in Jomphet District in which local officials attempted to force villagers to renounce their Christian faith. This was reported to LEC leaders in Vientiane who alerted the LFNC in Vientiane. When the provincial LFNC officials were notified, they called the individuals involved, including the local officials, religious leaders, villagers, and police officers, to a meeting in Luang Prabang to sort out what happened and discuss Decree 92. Mr. Kongchanh characterized the meeting as a serious discussion and stated that the situation was resolved with local authorities now better understanding Decree 92. He stressed that in the future he hopes that religious leaders will bring any cases of misunderstanding directly to him rather than going through Vientiane first.

¶12. (SBU) Highlighting best practices in Luang Prabang, Mr. Kongchanh stated that the Provincial LFNC office was committed to using every means to educate its people about Decree 92. When cases of alleged violation or conflict do occur, the Provincial LFNC

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officials do not jump to conclusions but instead try to hear all sides and work to resolve the situation in accordance with Decree ¶192. Leadership, he explained, is about educating, listening, and resolving conflict. Mr. Kongchanh also mentioned an LEC-sponsored training conference on Decree 92 that had been held in Luang Prabang in late 2008 as very successful. Finally, Mr. Kongchanh stated the Provincial LFNC sought financial support to print more than 100 copies of Decree 92 to send to all the leaders in the province.

Luang Prabang: An Activist Christian Leader

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¶13. (SBU) On their return through Luang Prabang later that week, the officers visited a local LEC church service on Sunday morning. The church, in a converted house, was located immediately outside the city of Luang Prabang, as officers were told that Christian services are not permitted in the historic city itself. The congregation was multi-generational though the majority appeared to be in their early 20s. They performed cheerful praise songs that they had practiced during the week. Some individuals wore t-shirts displaying their Christian affiliation. To DRL/IRF Off and PolOff, this suggested a well-established community that was openly practicing its faith.

¶14. (SBU) After the service the officers spoke with the head Pastor, Reverend Boun Noy Souliphay. Reverend Boun Noy related that he had been jailed a total of three years because of his faith, the last time in 2003. However, he explained that things have improved in

recent years and stated that on the whole there is now more religious freedom in Luang Prabang. According to Reverend Boun Noy, there are now 10,000 Christians in Luang Prabang Province able to attend services in 48 locations: three houses converted into full time churches and 45 home church services.

¶115. (SBU) Referring to the incident that Mr. Kongchanh had raised earlier (see para 11), Reverend Boun Noy stated that few of Luang Prabang's 11 districts have experienced problems in recent years, but those problems, including the one that had occurred in Jomphet District, had been resolved satisfactorily. Referring to the meeting the Provincial LFNC had called in Luang Prabang to resolve the Jomphet problem, Reverend Boun Noy confirmed that local officials, police, religious leaders, and villagers had attended and that there had been no intimidation at the meeting as the LFNC clarified Decree 92 for local officials. Noting that it had taken three months from the incident's occurrence until the meeting was held and the situation resolved, Reverend Boun Noy seemed to suggest that such a time lag was to be expected as it involved communicating, organizing, and transporting people from a remote district to the Provincial center for the critical meeting.

Oudomxay - Further from the Center

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¶116. (U) Because DRL/IRF Off's meetings were only approved on the day of her arrival in Laos, the schedule was still in flux when officers arrived in Oudomxay Province. A meeting with the LFNC was promised, but poor communications meant that the time was still unconfirmed until the last minute. The challenges both the LFNC in Vientiane and the accompanying Embassy FSN faced in locating the Vice President of the Oudomxay Provincial LFNC were a good reminder of the distance the officers had traveled from Vientiane and the real infrastructural and communication challenges the Lao Government faces in working with some of its outer provinces.

¶117. (SBU) The Vice Chairman of the Oudomxay Provincial LFNC, Khamxay Manysoth, presented a demographic breakdown of the province which has a total population of 267,000 comprised of 14 different ethnic groups speaking 4 main languages. The largest ethnic group, the Khmu, comprise 60% of the province's population. Much of the population follows animist beliefs and practices ancestor worship. The remaining population includes Buddhists and Christians. There are a total of 629 Buddhist monks (comprising 97 senior monks and 532 novices) and 95 Buddhist temples in the province, of which 70 are active and 25 abandoned. Christians number approximately 1,747 people in 327 families. There is only one official church in Oudamxay, built in 1945 by the French (it was subsequently bombed by the United States but has since been restored). House churches also exist.

¶118. (SBU) Turning to religious freedom policy, Mr. Khamxay cited both Decree 92, which promotes the right to believe or not to believe, as well as Article 9 of the Constitution, which forbids creating divisions in society. Decree 92, he explained, allows for the promotion of religion in a way that conforms to the needs of society. To this end, the LFNC encourages religious believers to participate in poverty reduction programs. Mr. Khamxay cited good relations with the Oudomxay Christian community which is helping to build a primary school at a cost of USD 34,000. The LEC also provided water supply projects in 4 Oudomxay villages at a similar cost. Every year the LEC facilitates Christmas ceremonies in the

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Oudomxay provincial center which provincial officials attend. Mr. Khamxay also referenced the participation of 60 people in an LEC training program on Decree 92 held in Oudomxay in 2008.

¶119. (SBU) Mr. Khamxay, like his colleagues in other provinces, stated that, if a conflict involving religious issues occurs, the Provincial LFNC will invite those involved to a meeting to resolve the issues and ensure that all understand and abide by the intent of Decree 92. One of the main problems Oudomxay has faced regarding religion, he explained, has been competition between different Christian groups for followers. While most Christians in Oudomxay are LEC members, some Christian leaders in Thailand have attempted

to send their own messages across the border to pull people away from the LEC. As another example, Mr. Khamxay explained that in 2004 there had been a conflict between the LEC and a Calvinist sect conducting services in the forest. As the LEC is the main recognized Protestant group in Laos, the LFNC favors the LEC in the resolution of these conflicts.

¶20. (SBU) PolOff raised the 2008 case in Oudomxay's Nam Reng District in which seven families had reportedly been forced to recant their faith. Mr. Khamxay said that the Provincial LFNC had not heard about this case. Instead, he talked about a 2008 case in which eight Christians from the Khmu ethnic group had crossed the border to Thailand and had been sent back to Laos where they were arrested, he explained, because of the illegal border crossing. By April 2009, he stated, all individuals involved had been released.

Luang Namtha - Are We in China?  
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¶21. (SBU) Traveling the winding, and sometimes treacherous two-lane mountain-side highway from Oudomxay to Luang Namtha, officers arrived at Laos' northwestern border province just before sundown. Many of the hillsides along the way had been stripped for future planting of rubber trees or other crops, or showed signs of having been recently planted. The extensive rubber plantations in Luang Namtha are being funded by the Chinese and their extent, coupled with the sparsity of the population in Luang Namtha, is a visual reminder that the Chinese would likely be bringing in large numbers of their own skilled workers across the shared border to harvest the rubber in the years to come.

¶22. (SBU) Luang Namtha's provincial center appeared modestly developed, with predominately 2-story buildings interspersed with traditional wood structures. That was true until the officers arrived at Luang Namtha's new 6-story hotel. This grand structure, painted pink and fronted with two-story white colonnades, was still under construction but stuck out in the otherwise peaceful and modest cityscape. When checking in, the manager told PolOff that they were "in China," emphasizing that the hotel was built by the Chinese and thus run according to Chinese practices. The only other tall structure in the provincial center was the Governor's office building, which resembled the hotel in general design and was much grander than either the Luang Prabang or Oudomxay provincial offices. In a later discussion, PolOff learned that the provincial Governor was a former Lao Minister of Education and had strong ties to the Vietnamese who were supporting educational development in the province. The Governor's office building had been built for the province by the Vietnamese. Comment: These visually competing structures seemed to encapsulate the dynamic in this remote province as Laos forges partnerships with competing bedfellows in order to develop its own economy and improve conditions for its people. End comment.

¶23. (SBU) Luang Namtha Vice Chairman of the Provincial Lao Front, Khamchan Dengmany, told DRL/IRF OFF and PolOff that Luang Namtha has a total population of 145,310 comprised of 17 ethnic groups. The Akkha, the largest ethnic group, comprise over 40% of the population with the Khmu as the second-largest ethnic group. Most Akkha practice traditional beliefs including animism and ancestor worship. Formerly, Buddhism was the one organized religion in Luang Namtha, however Christianity arrived around 2002. About 480 people in the province now are Christians. There are 76 Buddhist temples with 128 senior monks and 423 novices. There are no Christian churches in Luang Namtha, however the provincial government would allow believers to worship at home. In order to gather in a group, however, believers must obtain permission from village authorities; according to Mr. Khanmchan, none had requested to do so.

¶24. (SBU) Mr. Khamchan explained that the LEC has assigned a committee of five religious leaders to Luang Namtha Province. Four are based in the provincial center, and one is in Sing District, where officers would travel later that afternoon. According to Mr. Khamchan, the LEC and the LFNC in Luang Namtha have a good working relationship. When there are conflicts in the province, the provincial LFNC has invited the local LEC leaders to help resolve them using Decree 92 as their baseline.

¶25. (SBU) PolOff asked Mr. Khamchan about one recently reported case in Luang Namtha Province. In Long District in January 2007, twenty-three Yao and Hmong were reportedly forced to renounce their faith. In response, Mr. Khamchan implied that the problems in Long District were likely the fault of the believers. He stated that believers had to learn more about their own religions and that they needed to learn to be good citizens. Mountain or remote people are often ignorant, he said. If there are misunderstandings between believers and local authorities, the LFNC, he said, would help to explain the law. When new religions come into an area, he continued, there is conflict in the family, and this has to be resolved. Further, many people join new religions because they have been coerced. When those individuals do not get what they want, they leave the faith. Thus, the number of believers goes up and down.

¶26. (SBU) Asked about an incident in Nam Khon Noy Village in Viengphoukha District in July 2008, Mr. Khamchan said that people from Bokeo had come into the district to conduct religious activities. Local officials objected to the Bokeo individuals coming into their district without seeking permission and reported the problem to the LFNC in Luang Namtha which in turn reported it to LFNC Bokeo. Mr. Khamchan said he did not know how Bokeo officials had resolved the conflict, which he saw as in their jurisdiction.

Muang Sing - 8 kilometers from China

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¶27. (SBU) Following the morning meeting in Luang Namtha, officers were accompanied by provincial LFNC officials to the Sing District, the northernmost district of Luang Namtha Province, 8 km from the border with China. Here officers met with Mr. Sengvong Malangsy, Deputy Chief of Sing District, and the District LFNC official while Mr. Khamchan sat between them in their simple district office. Mr. Sengvong explained that there were two main religions practiced in Muang Sing: Buddhism and ancestor worship. In addition to that there were a small number of Christians. PolOff was told that the population of Muang Sing is 30,000, with 8,800 Buddhists and 70-some Christians. There are 27 Buddhist temples in the district. Christianity came to Muang Sing via returnees from Thailand in about 1992. According to Mr. Khamchan, there are no Christian churches, but believers are allowed to practice in their homes.

¶28. (SBU) PolOff asked about a July 2008 incident in Muang Sing during which one Christian was reportedly arrested, but he was told by Mr. Sengvong that it never happened. In a similar vein, when PolOff asked about the one LEC committee member that provincial officials told him was located in Muang Sing, Mr. Sengvong said that there was no such person in the district.

... Muang Sing - Talking to Villagers

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¶29. (SBU) Mr. Sengvong invited the visiting American officers to a meet with village leaders in the area to better understand their lives and beliefs. The entourage was directed to a solid school building next to an open field that served 5 neighboring villages. The other village structures were of simple construction, made mostly of thatch, and it was clear that the school building was the typical space for important inter-village meetings. More than 20 men attended the meeting, including a local police officer who remained silent throughout. Included were three village heads, village elders, and local members of the LFNC, though not all individuals were introduced. The group explained that the majority of residents in their villages practiced traditional beliefs, including ancestor worship. There were no Buddhists. Interestingly, however, the three village chiefs present said that they had 8, 9, and 42 Christians in their communities respectively. This seemed surprising given that officers had been told that there were only 70-plus Christians in all of Sing District. The two village leaders with smaller numbers of Christians said that their Christian believers only practiced their faith at home and were not allowed to meet in a group. However, the village leader with 42 Christians said that the community of believers met together in a separate structure to worship.

¶30. (SBU) The group proved eager to talk about Christianity. This new religion was creating conflict, they said, and they were glad that the LFNC could come in and set these mostly young people straight. Village elders complained that often cases of conflict arose when families planned important animal sacrifice ceremonies or funerals, and the Christian family members - often younger members - refused to take part. This was an insult to the family and the ancestors and would lead to unnecessary divisions and estrangement within the families. Fortunately, when such conflicts occurred, villagers could notify the LFNC which would help make the young people leave their new religion and respect tradition. This had happened a number of times during the past one or two years, they explained.

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COMMENT

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¶31. (SBU) While the LFNC, in apparently close conjunction with the LEC, seems to be making an effort to implement Decree 92 throughout the country, there are clear challenges in the form of weak infrastructure, insufficient budget, low levels of education, and distance from the center that mean there is more work to be done. The more remote provinces where, in recent years, incidents of violations of religious freedoms have been reported, are facing serious economic and humanitarian challenges. With the national budget being prioritized to deal with long-term development plans, religious freedom issues tend to be addressed on a somewhat piecemeal basis as they arise.

¶32. (SBU) Nonetheless, the cooperation between the LFNC and the LEC is clearly having an effect. Laos' participation in international religion and law conferences, such as the ones sponsored by IGE, as well as domestic training programs are gradually providing officials, religious leaders, and security officers with the correct tools to better address violations of religious freedom in reference to the protections provided by the state under the Prime Minister's Decree 92 on Religion. The LFNC's willingness to respond to high-profile cases of religious freedom violations suggests that continued emphasis on rule of law and the importance of supporting religious freedoms on the part of the United States and the international community may help Laos develop a more comprehensive policy implementation in the coming years.

HUSO